The Bhikkhuni Order: Can it be Re-established?

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At present there is a clamour for the re-stabilisation of the Bhikkhuni Order. As a preamble, some facts related to its establishment, later expansion and final extinction are given.

This is for the careful consideration of the Maha Sangha and the Buddhist laity, who have equal responsibilities as regard the preservation of the Buddha Sasana.

When during the time of the Buddha, Mahapajapati Gotami pleaded with Him to enter the Sasana, He put her off with these words: “Do not be interested O, Gothami about the entry of woman into my Order.” (Cullavagga). This request was turned down for the second and third time.

Sometime latter, along with 500 Sakayan princesses, Pajapati Gotami having had her hair cut off, having donned saffron robs set out for Vesali, and in due course approached the Buddha and repeated her request. The Buddha turned down the request once again. Subsequently, the Ven. Ananda pealed with the Buddha for the ordination of females, giving various reasons.

The Buddha elucidated the harm that may befall the Sasana on these words:

‘If Ananda, wemen had not obtained the going forth from home to homelessness in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth finder, now, Ananda, the brahma-faring will not last long, true dhamma will endure only for fie thousand years.”(Cullavagga Vol V, p 356).

The Buddha finally acceded to the appeal of Ven. Ananda subject to Prajapati Gotami accepting eight conditions referred in the text as atthagaru dhamma.

They are observances pertaining to monastic propriety and procedure in the Order of Bhikkhunis in relation to the Bhikkhus. According to the

commentarial literature the potential dangers to the Sasana were minimised by the acceptance of the eight conditions by Mahapajapati Gotami.

Records show that the contemporary bhikkhus were critical of Ven. Ananda for his intervention as regards the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order in spite of the warnings that had already been sounded.

Beside the eight conditions, as a further precautionary measure, additional vinaya rules were promulgated for bhikkunis. The Bhikkhuni Patimokkha, therefore, consists of 311 rules discipline.

After the passing away of the Buddha, the Bikkhuni Order spread to the other countries as well. It was introduced to Sri Lanka by Theri Sanghamitta. According to historical records, the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka survived until about the 11^{th} century C.E.

By the time of King Vijayabahu I the Bhikkhu Order too has declined in Sri Lanka. There were many causes for this, uppermost being the political unrest and the hegemony of the Colas of south India over Rajarata. It is likely that the Bhikkhuni Order too declined and finally became extinct for the same reasons.

King Vijayabahu re-established the Bhikkhu Order with the help of erudite monks from Ramanna in lower Burma. However, there is no record of the re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order.

Therefore, one has to surmise that the Bhikkuni Order had ceased to exist by the time of King Vijayabahu I. If the Bhikkhuni order was in existence in any of the countries where the Theravada tradition prevailed, undoubtedly Vijayabahu I would have taken steps to re-establish the order in Sri Lanka.

According to Chinese records, Bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka had visited China during the reign of King Mahanama and established the Bhikkhuni Order in that country.

Although there is an Order of Nuns to-day in countries such as China and Vietnam, it is the accepted view of Maha Theras of the Theravada tradition that it does not conform to the Theravada Vinaya rules.

In countries like Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos where the Theravada tradition prevails, there is no Bhikkhuni Order. No one ever talks about re-establishing the Bhikkuni Order in those countries because they are aware that is not possible, according to the Vinaya rules, to do so.

This question has been raised from time to time in Sri Lanka. Recently it took a dramatic turn when two European females requested admission to the non-existing Bhikkhuni Order. Several letters appear in the newspapers written by persons of diverse educational standing.

However learned they were in their own disciplines, it was quite clear that they were ignorant of the Vinaya Rules. They cannot be blamed for their ignorance. Being learned men by their own right there is no doubt that they will accept the correct position once it is stated.

The Buddha in his discourses always emphasised intelligent analysis and against blind faith. He trained the people in their capacity to think. “A person who does not think cannot progress”, He proclaimed.

The Kalama Sutta lays down the scientific principle of thought. The Mahapadesa Sermon contains the procedure both for thinking and the finding of logical solutions to problems that would arise. A specific problem pertaining to the Dhamma must be resolved with reference to the totality of the *Dhamma*. Matters pertaining to discipline must be resolved in relation to other rules of the Vinaya.

Higher Ordination (upasampada) is an act related to the Vinaya. Therefore the question whether a Bhikkhuni can be granted the Higher Ordination is a matter that has to be resolved with reference to the totality of the Vinaya rules.

Duering the time of the Buddha, there were eight ways for the conferment of *Upasampada*. However six of these became extinct with the demise of the Buddha and only two remained. The monks receive higher ordination according to the natti-catuttha-kamma, explained below.

For conducting the act of Higher Ordination three other conditions must be present. They are *Sima Sampatti* i.e. the availability of specially delimited

regions to be units of co-residence and performance of common *uposatha; parisa sampatti* i.e. the availability of the required number of bhikkhus, who had duly obtained their higher ordination; and Kammavaca Sampatti i.e. availability of the conferment of the *upasampada* by the method of *Kammavaca.*

The latter required a formal resolution made before the Sangha (natti-catutthena Kammena) *by the recipient, clad in robes and carrying the begging bowl, he is conferred the higer ordination.*

For the Bhikkhunis, the higher ordination act has to be performed according to the eightfold course of proceeding (atthavacika upasampada.) In case of bhikkhunis too the three conditions required for the proper performance of the upasampada act should have been fulfilled.

In the atthavacika upasampada kamma as regards the bhikkhunis the formal resolution (natti-catuttha kamma) should first be made before the bhikkhuni sangha and then before the bhikkhu sangha.

Thus the resolution is presented as a motion three times and followed (as the forth time) by the decision twice over. Hence the term atthavacika upasampada for the higher ordination as regards the bhikkhunis.

Even today in countries following the Theravada tradition the higher ordination act is conducted with Sima according to the Vinaya Rules. For all such act a minimum of five bhikkhus who had received the Higher Ordination according to the unbroken tradition of the Theravada Bhikkhu sangha should be present.

It is customary, however, to have a larger number of Bhikkhus. The operative sentence or kammavaca in Pali is uttered in the presence of Bhikkhu Sangha. Great importance is attached to the correct articulation of the kammavaca, so much so that the Presiding Maha Thera will insist upon its repetition until the pronunciation is absolutely perfect.

So much of importance is given to the *Kammavaca* in the Theravada tradition.

The Sinhala Bhikkhunis who visited China during the time of King Mahanama were received with respect at Nanking and conducted to a monastery. There they had met a large number of devotees including some bhikkhunis. The Sri Lanka Bhikkhunis, the tradition goes, had questioned their counterparts as to how they has obtained their higher ordination.

They replied that they had obtained it from a Bhikkhu named Gunawarman. When they were informed of its impropriety, a request was made from the Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis for a proper higher ordination.

In India, outside the Madhyadesa, five Bhikkhus who have received their higher ordination according to the accepted procedures, have been considered adequate for a *vinaya kamma.*

However because of the task ahead in re-establishing the Bhikkhuni order, including the higher ordination of the Chinese Bhikkhunis, more Bhikkhunis had been invited from Sri Lnaka. These facts and the Sri Lankan connection were revealed for the first time by the French scholar Sylvan Levy.

After the Second World War, Ven. Thi Tsu of China, an eminent person, undertook a worldwide mission: in the course of which, after visiting many Buddhist countries, he came to Sri Lnaka too. Not only was he taken up by the Bhikkhu Sasana in Sri Lanka, nurtured in the Theravada tradition, but also he accepted the fact that was no properly constituted Bhikkhu Order in china.

After his return to China, a request was made by him to the Mahabodhi Society and his pupil Ven. Fa-Fang to send a delegation of monks to establish a Theravada Order. For the exploratory mission I was selected along with Ven. Soma and Ven. Kheminda. It was intended that we stay in China for five years.

Although travelling was extremely difficult just after the war, we embarked on our journey by ship on Vesak Full Moon Day in 2490/1946. After nine weeks we arrived in Shanghai via Singapore and Hong Kong. We were received with much respect by the Buddhist, Led by Ven. Tai Tsu.

The new centre was located at the shrine of Ven. Fa-Hsien, the famous traveller monk, at Shansi. Among the many important decisions made at the

discussions that ensured were that of training a sufficient number of Chinese Bhikkhus in the Theravada tradition and of conferring Higher Ordination on them after the establishment of a *Sima* in China for which the assistance of Maha Theras from Sri Lanka was to be obtained.

In this way it was intended to establish the Theravada Bhikkhu Order in China.

Although our assignment covers only a period of five years, we told them that we were prepared to spend our whole lifetime if this could be achieved. They were very pleased with our intentions.

However, the Chinese civil war intervened, and we were compelled to return after nine months. During our stay we had visited many monasteries of Chinese monks and nuns*, we saw with what great devotion they, especially the nuns were following the religious practices.

Nevertheless, they followed a different tradition and the seemed quit unfamiliar with the *dhamma* and the *vinaya* the way we are familiar with. The attempts to establish the Thravada Bhikkhu Order in China by Ven. Tai Tsu and other ended in failure due to the civil war.

At that time there were around there million monks and nuns who had received Ordination under the Mahayana Tradition.

When in china, we discussed the reference to the founding of a Bhikkhuni Order in China by a group of Bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka. No one seemed to have been aware of such an event.

We requested that the matter should be investigated by scholars. Some undertook to comply with our request. One of them was a Mr. Lee, who had been earlier monk at the Vajirarama. He was able to collect some information.

We were overjoyed that we were instrumental for unearthing new historical data as regards the Bhikkhuni Sasana in China and we wrote regards the same from China.

It was pointed out earlier that three conditions have to be fulfilled for the proper performance of the Vinaya act in *Upasampada.* We are not aware

whether or not specific geographical location or Simas were available in the early days of Buddhism in China.

But in 1946 we could not find a proper constituted Sima (*Sima sampatti*) to perform the *uposatha kamma.* As regards parisa sampatti, there were no Bhikkhus who had been ordained in the Theravada tradition available in China.

The operative sentence in Pali or the kammavaca (Kammavaca sampatti), too, was not known and was not available. Therefore it is quite clear that there is not even a properly ordained Bhikkhu Order in China that could be recognised according to the Theravada tradition. Quit apart from a Bhikkhuni Order.

When fats are so very clear it is a grave offence even to suggest that the Bhikkhuni Order can be re-introduced to Sri Lanka from China.

If a person has developed the perfections and has cultured the mind according to the Teaching, Nibbana can be attained even if that person has taken only the five precepts. If that person is following higher precepts it is definitely better.

Since this is so, it is quit possible for Dasa Sil Mathas who observe the ten higher precepts to develop virtue, concentration and wisdom (sila, samadhi, and panna) and realise the goal of Nibbana. When there is no hindrance to higher attainments by being a dasa sil matha why waste time in discussing about an Upasampada act, which is a Vinaya Kamma, for which the conditions according to the vinaya are extinct.

Let there can be a clear notion of what is required. Is it the title of a 'Bhikkhuni' or the Virtus of a 'Bhikkhuni'? There is no obstruction to follow the rules of a Bhikkhuni with or without the title of 'Bhikkhuni'.

The late sister Uppalavana, a German nun followed many of the vinaya rules of a Bhikkhuni who has received higher ordination whilst being of Dasa Sil Matha, she was very well known for her virtues and erudition.

It was even said that she had attained higher states. Learned Dasa Sil Matha like Sister Sudharma, who are well versed in the Vinaya, have openly

declared that a Bhikkhuni Sasana cannot be established where as another group, learned but not well conversant with the Vinaya, seems to be indulging in hair splitting arguments and a campaign of vilification of the Maha Sangha.

If the people and the government are genuinely concerned about the walfare of Dasa Sil Mathas, there is much that can be done. A large majority of them are in dire straits. They do not get proper food and shelter. They have no facilities for learning the Dhamma and to practise meditation.

There are over 8000 temples in Sri Lanka today. The number supported by bequests granted by the Royalty in the past is less than 500. Approximately 3500 temples are in fairly good condition due to the support of lay devoted and originations.

Therefore more than half the temples are not well supported and the Bhikkhus therein lead a very difficult life without even the basic requisites.

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